

Sample Translation

Washed Flesh

(Gewassen vlees)

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Prologue

The cold pressed down like a seal upon the petrified landscape. Nothing moved, only the air did, invisibly the bare trees stood motionless in the icy gale. Stale dew, already frozen at the onset of the frost, glistened on the green yet lifeless fields, the furrows from the plough spread like a fossilised pattern across them. It was as if the cold had brought all time to a halt as well, making it take shelter in the ground and in the things that, suddenly old, grew rigid beneath so many alien times past. The world had turned into an imprint, the fact of a continuous moment.

Nobody saw Obe, the way he was standing there on wobbly ankles among the reeds. To his right, behind the inner dike with its old, ever-open lock leading to the harbour basin, lay the little town on the left, shooting off through the Nieuwland, the frozen canal that eventually joined the Zuiderzee. The wind, lofted by the dike, hurtled by above his head; in fact he wasn't really in range of the built-up area any more.

He tarried for just a little while longer and then with a single mighty thrust he freed himself from the bone dry reeds. At once he gained a dashing air about him; his heels turned inward facing one another, he spun round in front of the lock until he came to a halt once more but now he was as proud as a dancer, as fierce as a huntsman at the meet. He pulled his fur hat down over his ears and pushed off. The canal was like a stretch of glass, black and glinting all at once in the sun poised right up above the new sea wall at the far end. The moon had already risen much higher.

Once he was out of the lee of the dike, the wind in his back became so strong it seemed as though it wasn't the empty air that was thrusting him onward but a thing, a hand moulded to the shape of his body, one that was supporting him too as he glided from side to side in a continually slowing cadence between the edges of the canal. His strokes were becoming so slow that, almost to the point of snagging himself, he would only make the change of stroke and foot at the very

last moment. For just an instant, because of their proximity, he would then be able to hear the hiss of the wind in the reeds.

At the point where the canal curved its way round a farm, the fringe of reeds opened up and a second boy appeared, Okke, who joined in Obe's wake without a word of greeting. This boy, too, was wearing a fur hat. Making the same extenuated strokes, they skated on in the direction of the sea, one close behind the other and keeping time so closely they formed a single creature, a ladies' mount moving with an unceasing, lazy, ambling gait. Beyond, the freight office was already coming into view, for the moment just a little cube on the ever rising plinth of the sea wall; everything seemed to be made of wood, hard and straight, the bare ploughed fields too, fields where there wasn't a single crow pecking away at the furrows.

Self-contained, the reeds slid by until the interruption of a broad side channel appeared. There, immediately around the corner, a flat-boat had been moored on which a third figure came into view, a motionless doll wrapped in lengths of cloth sitting with its back turned to the wind: the girl, Ekke. Quickly, without making a sound, both boys veered down the side channel and with scraping irons athwart they came to a halt on either side of the boat. The girl jumped up, feigning more fright than she had felt, and then with a peal of laughter she looked at one and then at the other, her laugh being one that froze instantly. There was already a tooth missing from her upper jaw.

'He's not there yet?' Okke shouted.

Ekke shook her head so fiercely it made the lappets of her bonnet flap about.

'He isn't there yet!' Okke called out to Obe.

The wind was striking Obe full in the face now, and again, very softly, he heard the restless rustle of the reeds as well; it was as though it had accompanied him from town. His eyes filled with tears and everything became a blur: Ekke, trying to tie down the wrapping around her hand that had come undone; the filigree of the top of a tree against the royal blue sky now a grainy blot; even the glittering light on the ice merely seemed like foam on water now.

‘He isn’t coming!’ Okke shouted to Ekke, helping her by pressing his finger down on the knot. The girl tightened the loop and nodded that he would turn up alright.

‘Fine, so he’s coming... with nothing!’ Okke exclaimed scornfully.

Meanwhile, without doing anything, just like that, because of the wind, Obe glided backwards and a smile appeared on his face... Ekke saw it and pointed, Okke turned his head round but with a few strokes Obe was already on his way back to them. ‘Perhaps he’s already gone on ahead of us,’ he said calmly and continuing his movement he glided off, leaving the side channel. Ekke and Okke rose from the bank and the next moment the three of them were skating along in the same manner the two of them had been earlier, and on their own even earlier still: indeed, even before they had met up they had already been a group. The low sun glinted blindingly on the ice.

The sea wall with its new locks lay like a heavy beam on the edge of the landscape. At first the shadow fell across their feet and then it rose benevolently to above face level as, without making another stroke, they glided into the darkness: the light had fatigued them. As soon as they were able to see again they peered along the black, tarred lock doors and behind the groynes but there was no one there. Fine snow drifted up in eddies here and there; except for that, nothing else moved. ‘He isn’t there!’ Okke shouted.

Obe skated calmly into the reeds saying that perhaps he had already crossed to the other side. In the same order they had been skating in, they clambered up against the dike, the girl Ekke on her little bone skates in between them. The freight office too was deserted: there had been no lockage of ships here for weeks now. They hobbled past it and then they halted full of awe at what arose in all its splendour before their eyes. Once again the sun was in their faces, even brighter still: the world itself was luminous now.

Low tide: the frozen Zuiderzee lay at the foot of the dike, a thick serrated edge on top of the dry clay sea bed. Hollows, created by the curling of the ice as the water withdrew underneath, were gaping everywhere. It was as though the land

was being gnawed at by a glinting monster, a flatfish as big as the sea itself. The creature still had its mouth slightly open even now: it wished to savour not to bite, but it could close its jaws any moment now, thrusting those fearsome glass teeth into the coast. On its back, further away from the shore, large tumours were visible; the silvery scaly skin bulged a little there above the tide lands uncovered at low tide. These flat-topped warts had a solitary shrub for hair. Beyond these only light remained.

At an angle down below was the outer harbour, protected by a crooked pier. Ekke and Okke went off to search there. Obe turned round to face the land one more time. From here the canal gleamed a gentle grey into the distance where right now a little speck was emerging from the bend by the farm. Again the wind cast a haze in front of his eyes so he was forced to take refuge behind a wall. When he looked a second time the approaching figure emerged once more, this time from the side channel where he, like the three of them, had waited on the boat for a moment. Indeed, it was peg-legged Petrus: his affliction showed even more clearly when skating than when he was walking. Every lengthy stroke, angled towards the bank, alternated with a much shorter one across, back to the centre. The boy was hunchbacked. This wasn't a second affliction but the sack he was going to bring along, only now properly visible for the first time. Obe sighed and allowed his gaze of satisfaction to roam the distant meadows; the icy gale had dried the tears from his eyes. The little town way back in the distance seemed like a stack of woodblocks set down temporarily there.

Petrus straightened out, skating up to his knees already through the shadow of the dike. Only now did Obe step forward. He waved until his greeting was reciprocated and then he went off after Okke and Ekke, diagonally down the leeward side of the dike facing the sea. He didn't have to climb on to the grinning border of ice but was able to lower himself from a jetty even more to one side. The two of them were standing leant against one another in front of the lock doors. Without a sound he glided towards them. There was no wind here, only a tremendous amount of light.

‘He isn’t coming!’ Okke shouted the moment he saw him.

‘He’s on his way,’ Obe said with a smile.

‘Yes, on his way...with nothing!’ Okke shouted again.

Gripped by the motionless yet violent sight of the ice, they waited for Petrus. When eventually he appeared he was beaming gleefully like one who always has to do the waiting but now had been the one waited for, for once. ‘Couldn’t you have waited for me?’ he cried at once. ‘We’d agreed to meet by the boat; why didn’t you wait?’ He sat down on the edge of the jetty without lowering himself on to the ice yet. All his glee had vanished and he looked the three of them defiantly in the face. The gunny sack dangled between his feet; there was movement within it and then a plaintive whine arose as well. Nothing happened for some time.

At a signal from Obe, Ekke pushed off. Gracefully, with one foot in front of the other, she glided towards the jetty. Her head was almost level with Petrus’ fat face drooping forward on to his knees with exhaustion. ‘Come on, Petrus ...’ she said quietly, ‘we waited here didn’t we? We thought you’d already got here...’

The words alone were enough to bring about a change of heart in Petrus, and when Ekke subsequently kissed him as well it was as though all the charge drained away through the girl into the ground. Thus the repulsion was neutralised, in just the same way as with Leyden jars, and Petrus could come down on to the ice.

They sat on their haunches around the sack which still remained closed. Petrus pointed out that there were only a few cats left: the ragtag and bobtail mob caught them to make soup, from the better class households too now.

‘We’re delighted with it,’ Obe said. ‘Did you manage it, with those nutshells?’

The question was a goad to action. Petrus put his arm up to his armpit down the puckered opening and drew the creature out with a retrieving gesture. It was a large, marmalade tom, well looked after. His black socks lodged in little clogs: Petrus had dipped its paws in tar and then he had pressed nutshells on to them. ‘His claws have been put away but he could still have bitten down into the gunny

just now,’ he said, pressing the creature to his chest. ‘Why didn’t he do that when I drew him out? His nature’s failing its duty!’

Obe took off a glove to finger one of the nutshells, very gently at first and then more forcefully. The shell was completely bonded to the tar and didn’t let go. The other nutshells too were stuck down solid. Stroking the cat, he asked whether Petrus was prepared. The nodding was bringing that fat face out in a sheen, a movement that mounted in its ferocity in response to the question whether he also understood what the purpose was.

‘Surely that showed just now, didn’t it?’ he cried, aggrieved. ‘Nature’s failing its duty!’

‘I told him!’ Okke now shouted. ‘He was only allowed to do it if he knew, wasn’t he? Ekke knows too!’

Obe put his glove back on. In silence they watched how Petrus pushed the cat back into the sack. ‘It could still resist with its teeth but it doesn’t,’ he called out over his shoulder. ‘It’s only thinking of its claws: that’s its nature.’

All four of them pushed off now. The wind wailed along the dike and down the shaft of the lock but once they were beyond these, it became quiet. They didn’t follow the hollow line of the pier but made directly for the tip, a pile of boulders. Obe saw the [stakes] marking the channel between the washlands down to the final buoy yonder and he felt himself to be at sea already, on that engulfing plane. The gale had drawn white lines now too, not of foam but powdery snow and windswept hoar frost already weeks old. Everything hurried off towards the silver sun that had positioned itself like a great sucking vanishing point of creation at the centre of the horizon, even the centre of the sky.

‘Half an hour down that way and you’ll never come back again!’ Okke shouted into his ear. ‘You’ll become exhausted. You’ll get lost. You’ll be lying there, blinded...’

They let Petrus go out in front with the sack. To left and right the tumours bulged, covered in a scaly skin of cruelly frost-fraught ice-floes. The stakes flashed past and soon they were leaving the tidewaters, ever faster through the

unbridled storm that blew everything bare. Once they had passed beyond the final buoy they had no marker out ahead of them at all any more, only that gleaming plane in which the grindings from their skates was blown to nothing. When finally Obe bade them to halt, there was little more left of the dike than an already almost obliterated line.

Every creature seeks to preserve itself; to that end, its nature bonds itself to the one around him, but should the latter be altered through art, then the nature that is within shall no longer find that salvation but in its search it shall uncover the very opposite: thus spoke Obe. Bare headed they sat there on their haunches arranged in a crescent around the sack, pressed closely together and with their backs to the wind.

Very calmly Petrus drew out the cat; he set it down slowly but it fell over instantly, slipping on the nutshells and the ice. It scrambled back on to its feet, fell over again, but then it was able to keep its footing, rubbing itself up against their knees. They went on stroking it for a while until Obe drew back his hand and then they parted slowly as they withdrew, backwards. Thus the creature was abandoned to the wind and the everlasting ice; it began to slide on its nutshells and was still watching Petrus while the wind was already spinning it round. Only now did the tail puff up, the cat putting it up like a flagpole which made its speed increase even more.

Ekke circled in elegant arabesques around the creature sliding along the ice with its paws splayed wide; then it would be crouching or fully stretched out. When it got stuck she bent over it but even before she could helpfully extend her bandaged hand Obe's voice rang out sharply: 'Hands off!'

It was only a rough patch, frozen foam the cat had come to a standstill on. It noticed it was able to walk and moved off diagonally but then it stiffened again instantly on the slippery ice.

'If only it could lie down until the storm abated,' Petrus cried, 'then it could quietly go home again!'

Slowly the cat began to spin off into the distance again but this time Ekke didn't follow. There was a gust of wind and Petrus saw the countless crests the wind made in its fur: at first the anus below the raised tail looked like one of those crests too, then it was as though the cat had acquired anuses everywhere with fear. After a while he saw the creature walking again but he knew this would lead towards the slippery ice for as long as it had the strength it would keep itself upright before the wind.

Shading his eyes with his hand Petrus continued to follow the cat. There was no life any more, only the red, dancing little flame in the distance. For a moment it seemed to come to a halt, then it went out and the only thing left was the mineral petrification of the ice with its membrane of antimony glinting brightly. The sun and the plane were silver forged together even now, and much later, when it thawed, mercury would rain down: overcome by all that chemistry, Petrus finally flicked his hand down like a visor he could no longer bear the light.

The sack was tugging at his arm, flapping about and only now, on opening his eyes, did he realise that the wind was bearing him along too. He wanted to show the others and was already laughing in anticipation but when he looked round there was nobody there any more. Instantly the wind bit into his cheeks like an acid.

With an angular movement he turned to face landwards. No matter how much light he had seen a moment ago, there wasn't enough there now for his blinded eyes. Only some moments later did he see them, disconcertingly far away and blurred against the dark grey. They were skating along so evenly, following each other closely, that taken together they almost seemed a single being. His shout was a sigh in the face of the storm.

All of a sudden he was very tired; he almost stumbled when he set his good leg athwart in order not to go backwards any further. The sun cast a long shadow ahead of him from behind but this would soon dissolve in the dusk, that great shadow already sliding along towards him from the land. Their movement itself was the only thing he could still see of the three of them, very gently to and fro.

The wind blew the tears from his eyes but dried them at once at the same time: they pricked his skin like needles. His gaze growing more and more vague with cold he stared across the empty plain towards the coast. The land beyond too would remain empty right up to the city. He was already having to make an effort to keep on standing still but he began to skate even so. When he let go of the flapping sack it was as though someone tore it from his hands.

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The widow lived in a small room, lavishly furnished with oriental carpets, above the workshop of a cobbler who was wenching feverishly in the bawdy house. With her large eyes, perfect teeth and her ready laugh she was an attractive woman of forty at most, and while pouring Rhine wine into green glasses she listened charmingly to Bergsma who, in order to drive her delight in the distinguished guest to a peak, at once had begun to sing his praises. Crusio and Messrs De Wit and De Bruin too conversed amiably with her and it was noticeable that this little dwelling was their favourite place of refuge. All found their release in jollity, jokes were being told, and following the symbolic tempest outside it was impossible to be indoors as much as they were here in this cocooned, women's apartment full of knick-knacks and novels, this innermost inner sanctum, this boudoir.

Conviviality was instantly so complete that Willem Augustijn was only capable of silence. While Bergsma, sitting there sprawling as if he had completed an exhausting march, continued to list his merits, the widow was continually casting furtive glances at him. He began to reciprocate and as time went by, intoxicated by the wine, the splendid qualifications Bergsma poured out over him with mild mockery, and above all by that naughty exchange of glances with that beautiful woman who was a complete stranger, he felt like a different man in a foreign land, a hero, a famous person who brings joy and excitement wherever he goes, whose coming has been looked forward to and who still knows himself to be clad in that golden mantle of superiority that others know about him compared with the little he knows about them.

‘But not only does he control an entirely new sugary, he's a bailiff as well!’ cried Bergsma. ‘The day after tomorrow he travels to his appointment.’

‘If only mother was still here to see it,’ he finally found the boldness to raise his voice, ‘but she died when I was only two..!’

‘And his father's always angry with him!’

‘Like Aeneas, I bear him on my back...’ He spoke so modestly his voice was almost a whisper. He bowed his head, flicked a bit of fluff from his knee and wallowed in the sympathetic gaze of the widow.

By falling silent at a certain point, Bergsma passed the torch to him. He took a deep breath, straightened his back and made a pleasantry about the house.

‘It’s small but I can manage ...’ the widow replied, bashful on purpose in order to set him at his ease.

Now the little room had been made the topic for discussion he was able to look round it with shameless attention. Every corner seemed to have been moulded and shaped to the woman herself, and greedily, as though he sniffed a body scent from a mattress or an item of clothing, he took in all those knick-knacks and baubles. His eye passed over the dolls on the window sill and then it climbed up the flock wallpapered chimney piece to the frilly floral fringe of the coving where it came to rest. Noticing that he no longer knew how to continue he broke into a sweat and suddenly he also heard the furious hammering of the cobbler down below again, louder and louder the longer he continued to look up.

‘My dear lady, if I might tear you away from our friend’s pleasant conversation -- we’re not intruding are we?’ Bergsma at last relieved him from his predicament. ‘Five of us, we come in unannounced all at the same time and I haven’t even asked you whether it’s convenient! You only need say the word and we’ll be off... Please, I implore you, nay, I order you, as governor, founded in the broad prerogative: speak freely, tell us what you were doing!’

Going along with the comedy the widow adopted a startled expression. ‘Well, indeed, because you compel me to: I was giving upstairs a going over, but...’

‘Did you hear that Van Donck?’ Bergsma interrupted her gruffly. ‘Upstairs needs a going over: a perfect opportunity to display your excellent manners! En garde, your assistance is required!’

Willem Augustijn jumped up, just catching sight of a wink from Bergsma and then, completely surprised by the speed with which events had taken a turn, he walked out of the door following in the widow’s wake. Her rustling, wagging

skirts went out a head of him up the stairs to her bed chamber where events gathered even greater speed, hurtling ahead beyond his reach so that he followed at a great distance and no longer had the slightest influence over them. He reached a room smelling heavily of amber and as the widow turned the key behind him, once, twice, he stared blushing at the large unmade bed of pleasure the open curtains of which, gathered in satin embrasses, were draped in lazy curves from the four-poster's canopy. When he turned round the widow had a feather duster in her hand.

‘Your coat will become all dirty like this; you had better take it off...’

Her Southern accent now struck Willem Augustijn like a leering glance, veiled and ambiguous. To be alone with this young yet mature woman in a secluded space; her comforting experience; the self-evident manner with which she had turned the key without asking; that she ordered him to take off an item of clothing; that she dared order him to do something, so matter of fact, so caring, so compelling; after the initial excitement it made him ease in an even more ecstatic way, one beneficent and liberating until a form of relaxation came over him which was new to him, one of being embraced, of being lifted up. Unresisting, he tossed his coat across the bed.

‘Sir, surely those shoes are a man's, are they not...’

Hurried by her sparkling eyes and contorted mouth, he took them off.

‘Your stockings...’

‘Your sword...’

‘Your breeches; tell me, what housekeeper would be wearing breeches? Or don't you want to help me?’

He stood there, dizzy, in his bare arse between the bed and the scrutinising widow turning away behind him. His anus, which had always remained sensitive after the many purgings, throbbed severely, but as long as he did not bend over he knew it to be veiled by his buttocks though these were pale and flat like plaice. With a rasping cough the widow emerged again on the other side.

‘At least you don’t have ulterior motives like most gentlemen,’ she concluded, lifting his limp willie for a moment with the feather duster, ‘nor are you making a fool of us as a woman in men’s clothes. You know the tale of Maria Kinkons surely, or don’t you read any novels at all? But coming to think of it: what ways are these, you standing there like this? I thought you had such splendid manners! Fie -- now let’s have you in that pinafore!’

Willem Augustijn no longer knew what was the most bizarre: his sudden nakedness in front of this complete stranger of a woman or allowing her to order him about and insult him; he had no idea at all any more and was only able to obey.

The little pinafore covered his shame at the front but emphasised it a thousand fold at the rear however with a large lacy bow above his buttocks. Finally, he also had to take off his cocked hat and exchange it for a little cornette cap, the two ribbons of which were tied beneath his chin in a second bow. At last the widow seemed to be satisfied; she looked him up and down approvingly but she instantly found her commanding manner again too: ‘Very well -- we’ll make a start with the skirting boards... Down on your knees!’

Kneeling down amounted to a fall through his own weight; it was a descent into a fluidum in which he was weightless, free of will and liberty, burdens which were handed over to her who remained standing; it was a surrender. A duster was tossed on to the ground for him and on the first command he crawled with it to the skirting board under the window. The widow had him hold the rag in his left hand; he was only allowed to use it after he had first found a dirty spot with his other, his searching hand. Of course it was not up to him to judge when this was the case: each time he had to run the index finger of his searching hand along a little part of the skirting and subsequently hold it up to the widow: according to the quantity of dirt hanging from it he then would or would not be given permission to dust that particular spot. The instructions were given in a low, veiled tone of voice: afterwards there was no room for doubt any more at all.

‘Go on, look for it... Look!’ Suddenly impatient, the widow struck her calves with the feather duster.

He ran his searching finger along the skirting board and raised it up to her with a grey cylinder of dust on it.

‘That’s right, that’s a dirty spot, now you do the dusting...’ She said the word with a marked stress on the first syllable: dusting.

In perfect cadence they continued to repeat this pattern, and the longer it lasted, the lighter Willem Augustijn’s spirits became. Time and again he raised his finger with the dust from a bit of skirting; each time the widow said, sometimes in an angry, indignant tone of voice, then in an approving one again, that it was a dirty spot; invariably he would then pass the duster across it with his other hand. Without any bemusement whatsoever any more, he crawled along all the skirting boards, passing among the chairs and gueridons, gradually merging completely with his actions, a crawling creature, light as a feather, an insect spreading its wings each time he let his rag flap about, and the only weight he was still able to feel was the that of the big, lacy bow on his back.

‘But that’s a dirty little spot!’

‘That’s right dear, you do the dusting...’

‘Now come over here.’

Mechanically he crawled back to the widow, who had moved across to stand at the window again, until his face was right above her slippers. The hubbub of the gentlemen sounded from down below, from even further down below, the constant hammering on the last.

‘Well done... Are there no more dirty spots?’

Too submissive to speak, he shook his head: there were no dirty spots any more, not anywhere.

‘Aren’t there? Then you’d better take another good look...’

Startled by a strange timbre in her voice Willem saw one of her slippers disappear at the same time. He raised his head and swallowed. The widow had placed the foot she had withdrawn on a little stool beside her and thus, adopting

the posture in which Venus is depicted, she began to raise the folds of her skirt, one by one, during which she continued to fix him with her gaze from on high. First the naked leg that was supporting her was freed, then the creamy inside of her raised thigh turned outward upon which the raised skirts finally came to rest without her having to hold on to them there. With both elbows resting on the window sill she leant over backwards slightly.

So steeply was he looking up that he was no longer able to close his mouth. The bow of his cap cut into his throat; he was no longer getting any air either. Trembling he saw how the widow began to nod to him approvingly, not only confirming by this that she had read his appalling thought but that he had to execute it too. When he raised his hand with the duster she therefore shook her head at once, forbidding him: that was the wrong hand, he had to search first, with his right index finger, the searching finger...

Very slowly he reached for the dark grotto of the widow; everything went much quicker after that. If his long, white finger was the paper cutter, the paper knife, then her sheath was the letter which he cut open with a steady stroke from the back to the front. When he subsequently showed the widow his finger dipped in flesh, saliva was running down his chin. For fear of making fresh mistakes he no longer dared to allow his gaze to leave his dominatrix.

‘Dirty, isn’t it?’ she said, very friendly from above her pronounced breasts. ‘That’s right, very dirty...now you do the dusting!’

Relieved for a moment, he changed hands and run the duster through the gash. Yearning for a sign he looked up.

‘Everything clean now?’

He nodded, just went on nodding. The staring up to high heaven made him dizzy, he had a pain in his neck but he did not stop nodding and looking up.

‘Are there really no dirty spots any more?’

In the same manner as he had nodded "yes" just previously, he now began to shake his head "no", and again without being able to stop doing so himself of his own accord; there was no longer any self present.

The widow's face clouded over while she continued to regard him fixedly over the top of her breasts. Willem Augustijn grinned, quite confounded, when he noticed her disappointment and then her indignation.

'I would think very carefully one more time...' she said in a threatening tone, 'or are you too one of those who can see the mote in another's eye but not the beam in his own?'

There was not a moment after insight blazed a trail within him or it surrounded him like warm, buoyant bath water. He let out a groaning sound of relief, then, after a last glance up above, he laid his head against the widow's foot and raised his arse even higher into air. There was no mistake this time; it was his right hand he brought demonstratively to his rear, he had his searching finger, stretched out in readiness, make an elegant flourish through the air as though he was about to take a dab of cream from a jar, and subsequently pushed it to well past the second phalanx into his arsehole that was pouting fiercely.

Lying down there blissfully obedient like this, nothing penetrated his consciousness any longer other than the beneficent fullness of his gently contracting anus. The pain in his neck had dissolved into tingling relaxation and nothing happened any more until precisely that serene peace became the thing that alarmed him. The widow kept silent, not uttering a single approving or disapproving word yet, and he no longer heard the hubbub from down below either, just the frenetic hammering from even further down: where was everybody? Where was he himself? With the sense of panic of a child that has hidden itself away and suddenly fears that it has been forgotten, he turned his head by ninety degrees so he could look up straight, in search of the widow. When he discovered her face still in the same place as before he knew himself to be even more deserted by her than if she had gone away however: radiant, she gazed high over the top of him at someone else behind him, a knowing smile around her mouth...

The feeling that he had hidden himself while nobody was looking out for him any longer could not have been more misplaced. Even the rustle of silence ceased

when the next moment he himself looked round as well, staring past his shoulder and with his finger still in his anus, unchanged. The door was wide open and framed by the doorway against the black backdrop of the passage, shoulder to shoulder in the dark opening, still and petrified like a tableau, stood Messrs De Wit and De Bruin on the threshold with immediately behind them, a head taller, Crusio and Bergsma...

He had the feeling as though he had crashed his head into a wall. Very slowly and quite impotent to do anything about it, he realised the sight he must present, viewed from the door; he realised how he was serving up his raised arse, embellished with a large bow, like a cream cake to those who were looking on, garnished by the same thing again in miniature, the petit-four of his just as festively bow-clad face in the paper punnet of his cornette cap. From sheer limpness his finger slid from his anus and only then did the family portrait in the doorway come to life.

‘Oh indeed, very dirty,’ De Bruin said.

‘Just you do the dusting,’ said De Wit.

Crusio moved now too; very slowly he raised something until it was above the two men in front of him: the handcuffs. Willem Augustijn saw them dangling to and fro for a moment and then the shame sank like a darkness, a death cap over his head and everything blacked out.

He had been falling to earth but there he had been flying past as well in a perfectly circular trajectory through the centrifugal force of his own speed; he had fallen the way the moon did according to Newton. Fully dressed, he rediscovered himself opposite Crusio, Israel and Bergsma in the widow’s living room, the widow herself being absent. They were sitting in judgement upon him; De Wit and De Bruin were play acting daftly as his counsel while Crusio, not play acting but in all seriousness, insisted on taking him into custody and delivering him into the hands of Justice. Bergsma said nothing, thoughtfully filling his pipe, and being the judge restricted himself to listening alone.

Yes, Bergsma was the judge, the shout of joy within him ran -- and less than an hour ago he had thought that he was the judge himself! But even then he had been on trial, even then he had had an anal cleft, an anal orifice and a sex, and Bergsma knew this: he had known the front end of his shame even before his twelfth birthday and now he had also viewed the rear end the way only yesterday he had viewed the Pieter de la Rocque case from both sides -- Bergsma always looked at everything from all sides, Bergsma was a philosopher!

‘No charge has even be laid!’ cried De Wit.

‘The Crown Prosecutor is sure to see to that,’ Crusio said. ‘The case’s one of lechery, a criminal matter. We’ve seen what we’ve seen, let the judge decide.’

‘What do you mean: we’ve seen what we’ve seen?’ De Bruin jeered. ‘Does rationalism mean nothing at all to you?’

When the lasts strands of fog lifted within him shame engulfed him once more, no longer as darkness but as an unbearably bright, hot light. Reality revolved grinding within his skull. He had been mistaken in everything except the extent to which Bergsma coveted the sugary. How could he have thought that Bergsma would ever ask him for anything? He had only given him the opportunity to offer something already knowing how , should he fail to get it, he would take it today by having him caught as he...in full sight of the all the police and judiciary of the town, sheriff, elders and governor...while he, trouserless... with his finger...in delicto flagrante... And he had been the one thinking that Bergsma no longer had the flair!

He cringed beneath a fresh wave of shame, trembling yet grateful too: so much shame Bergsma bestowed upon him, such more even than yesterday, burning shame, not only searing to the touch but to his soul as well, the thick deposit, that scale of vanity could only be consumed by the hottest, purifying shame -- again it was Bergsma who was helping him find the way to his heart, Bergsma knew...!

Ever more ridiculously Israel pressed for collusion, for absolution of authority, dismissal. Bergsma kept silent; to preserve his impartiality he even avoided looking the others in the face. He was filling his pipe with such attention that it

drove Willem Augustijn to despair. He wished desperately to give vent to his burgeoning understanding and gratitude even if this was done by means of but a single exchange of glances -- if only Bergsma would look at him for a moment..!

‘But after all, it’s perfectly scriptural what our friend has done, isn’t it?’ cried De Wit hilariously. ‘Did not the Lord God Himself once show his rearmost parts to mankind?’

‘Let’s have an end to this,’ Crusio said who visibly had had enough of this. ‘There isn’t a single reason for mercy: the suspect shall have to account for himself before the judge.’

‘But what about the prerogative,’ pleaded De Wit as two-faced as the devil’s hoofs were cloven. ‘Let us exercise clemency based on the prerogative. Perhaps you can’t see any reason for this but spare a thought for our friend! He will have to stand trial at the Court of Holland, he will be publicly disowned, he’ll lose his bailiwick and his freedom probably too... There is no reason for clemency after all!’

‘Quite so,’ Crusio said, now rising from his chair with the handcuff already unclasped. ‘The prerogative only allows clemency in the public interest.’

Bergsma had finished with his pipe, reached for the tinderbox on the table and in doing so raised his eyes for a moment. That was the moment Willem Augustijn had been waiting for. To show that he not only accepted fully the shame bestowed upon him and cherished this, but that he sought to stir it up even more fiercely, in order not merely to show this but to do so in practice too, he sniffed his finger, looking Bergsma straight in the eye, after which he let his hand go round in order to allow the others to smell too...

There was uproar. Goaded, Crusio wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and came into action but Willem Augustijn, bent down deeply towards the motionless Bergsma, no longer noticed this. Even when, in the corner of his eye, Crusio descended upon him from aside he continued to look at Bergsma in an exalted state and only at the very last moment, vaguely warding of the shadow,

did he cry out, his voice breaking: ‘No... yes... wait! Let me make the city a proposal!’